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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 002293

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KWBG IS GAZA DISENGAGEMENT ISRAELI PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: PEACE NOW DIRECTOR: NETANYAHU AND SHARON FINAGLE

AGREEMENT ON DISENGAGEMENT PLAN

REF: TEL AVIV 2250

Classified By: Political Counselor Norm Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Peace Now Director Yariv Oppenheimer told poloff on April 20 that PM Sharon and FinMin Netanyahu both know that prior GOI decisions on the fence route leave the Ariel settlement outside the main separation barrier, thereby not meeting Netanyahu's demand that it be fully on the "Israel" side of the route. Oppenheimer believes that Sharon and Netanyahu are masking the differences to cast the withdrawal plan to suit their own political exigencies. End summary.

You Say Tomato...

2. (C) Peace Now Director Yariv Oppenheimer told Poloff on April 20 that according to his understanding of the relevant GOI decisions on separation barrier routing to which PM Sharon referred in media comments after his April 18 Cabinet session (reftel), Ariel and some other major settlements deep in the West Bank would be protected by security fences, but those fences would not be connected to the main separation barrier at least in the near term. Netanyahu, however, announced to the media after the Cabinet meeting that he would support the plan because, he claimed, Sharon agreed that completion of the separation barrier, with Ariel and other major West Bank settlements on the "Israel" side, would occur before any settlement evacuations.

3. (C) According to Oppenheimer, PM Sharon needed to find a way to give Netanyahu an opening to support his plan -- support that most observers agree was critical to persuading other ministerial disengagement opponents to back the plan (reftel). Some politicians and media pundits also argue that Netanyahu's support for the plan will sway Likud voters to favor it in the May 2 referendum. Netanyahu cast Sharon's commitment to follow prior government decisions on the fence route as fulfilling Netanyahu's earlier demand for inclusion of named West Bank settlements, such as Ariel. Sharon did not dispute this interpretation, but never, publicly at least, named specific settlements to be included in the fence route. "Everyone is hearing what they want to hear," Oppenheimer exclaimed.

It's All About Image

4. (C) Netanyahu could not afford not to back the plan in the face of USG support, said Oppenheimer, so he needed to find a way to back it and Sharon helped him do this. Sharon's reference to prior government decisions "was just a political game to get Netanyahu" to support the plan, according to Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer pointed out that the game also worked for Netanyahu in that by supporting Sharon's plan, he could position himself within the mainstream, and thereby cast himself as prime minister material in case Sharon faces removal from office. "Netanyahu doesn't want to be alone on the right," Oppenheimer noted, but rather to back what he understands most Israelis want, especially if he wants to be prime minister again someday.

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